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Big Transit Plans Go Before Voters in November.

The proposals could reshape several large U.S. cities for decades to come — if they pass.

Transit agencies in Atlanta, Detroit, Los Angeles and Seattle are appealing to voters this fall to fund new services that the cities hope could transform their metropolitan areas for decades to come.

By going to voters in a presidential election year, the agencies are betting that big turnouts will help their cause. But even though local transportation measures generally fare well at the ballot box, each of these particular metropolitan areas has had a tricky history with transit. In fact, just getting the proposals on the ballot took significant effort in Atlanta and Detroit, and opponents are already organizing to block the far-reaching efforts in Los Angeles and Seattle.

The ballot measures push for new rail lines, better bus service and more connections to destinations such as airports, universities, hospitals and job centers.

Here's a rundown of each.

Going Regional (Finally) in Detroit

Voters in four Detroit-area counties will vote on whether to increase their property taxes by an average of \$95 a year to vastly improve transit in the region. If approved, the proposal would cost \$4.6 billion over 20 years.

[The plan](#) calls for building commuter rail between Detroit and Ann Arbor, adding four new bus rapid transit routes among major traffic arteries, creating bus routes that cross county borders and increasing regular bus service throughout the area. It also ensures that the region's four existing transit providers integrate services to share a fare card and a common call center.

It would be a major development for Detroit, which, until 2012, was the only major metropolitan area without a regional transportation authority. Michigan lawmakers OK'd the authority in order to get federal funding for Detroit's new streetcar line.

Warren Evans, the executive of Wayne County, which includes Detroit, praised the decision to put the tax hike and plan before the voters. That decision means "progress on an intractable problem that has dogged this region for 50 years," he said.

"This is an important decision for the citizens of this region," he added. "They will have to ask themselves a question: Should we join virtually every other urban area in the country in recognizing the importance of an efficient and effective public transportation system?"

Boosting Service in Atlanta

In another transit-starved area, Atlanta voters will decide whether to increase their sales taxes by 0.5 percent over 40 years to get better bus service, expanded rail routes and better incorporation of technology.

MARTA, Atlanta's transit system, hasn't specified exactly how the \$2.4 billion raised would be spent. But its leaders have proposed a [menu](#) of possibilities that also includes circulator buses, new rail stations on MARTA's existing subway lines and improvements to existing stations. The money would only come from within the city itself, not the rest of the three-county area MARTA now serves.

The vote in November, however, is complicated by the fact that the city council put another sales tax hike of 0.4 percent on the ballot for other transportation measures. That initiative would devote money to acquiring the remaining land to complete the so-called BeltLine, a 22-mile loop of parks, bicycle trails and other amenities around the city. In addition, it would pay for more bike trails, make roads more pedestrian- and bike-friendly, fix up sidewalks, and help coordinate traffic signals.

If both measures pass, it would raise Atlanta's sales tax to 8.9 percent, far higher than it is in other counties in the metropolitan area.

Expanding Farther and Wider in Seattle

Seattle's Sound Transit agency wants to double the size of its light rail network and expand its ability to reach the far-flung areas of Puget Sound. It's asking voters to approve \$54 billion in new funding over 25 years. The plan, known as ST3, would pay for seven light rail extensions, which would help grow the network from 54 miles to 116 miles; add commuter rail and bus rapid transit; and reach 37 new communities, bringing ridership up to 700,000 passengers a day.

All of that would cost a pretty penny, about \$169 a year for an individual taxpayer or \$326 annually for a typical household. It would be paid for through increases in property, sales and car-tab taxes.

Peter Rogoff, Sound Transit's CEO and a former head of the Federal Transit Administration, said the ballot measure could change the nature of the Seattle-area transit agency. "Right now, we are a commuter bus operator with a single light rail line," he [told](#) *Progressive Railroading* magazine. "The big transformation will be moving this from a light rail line to a true regional network."

But opponents say the improvements would do little to alleviate congestion in the Seattle area. Even by Sound Transit's own estimates, the agency would only provide 1 percent of trips in the region, according to the group Smarter Transit. "Today innovative ideas around ride sharing, driverless cars and bus rapid transit are being developed. But ST3 has little or none of these," the group says on its website.

Doubling Down on Taxes in Los Angeles

Transportation planners in Los Angeles County want to build on previous wins at the ballot box. They'll ask voters in November to make permanent a previous sales tax hike for transportation, plus add another half-cent sales tax hike to pay for both highway improvements and new transit projects. The tax increases would raise the cumulative sales tax in L.A. County to 9.5 percent.

The [proposal](#), called Measure M, is expected to generate \$860 million a year if it passes with the required two-thirds majority. It could be a close call. A similar measure in 2008 barely squeaked by with 67.2 percent of the vote, but a related bonding proposal fell just short in 2012. This year, Measure M will appear on a crowded ballot alongside 17 statewide ballot measures.

County supervisors voted 11-2 to put the proposal on the ballot, but many city officials, particularly in the southern part of the county, oppose it.

BY DANIEL C. VOCK | AUGUST 23, 2016

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